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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/23/2017

TAGS: PHUM PGOV BO

SUBJECT: VYACHORKA AND SIVCHIK SKIP COURT HEARINGS ON EVE OF DEMONSTRATION

REF: A. MINSK 218

¶B. MINSK 221

¶C. MINSK 228

¶D. MINSK 249

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

¶1. (U) On March 23, the Sovetskiy district court postponed the planned hearing for youth opposition activist Vyacheslav Sivchik and Belarusian National Front (BNF) leader Vintsuk Vyachorka to April 4 after both activists failed to show up. Vyachorka and Sivchik face hooliganism charges after security services arrested them on March 13, a move that many view as the GOB's measure to "neutralize" opposition leaders ahead of the March 25 demonstration (refs A-C).

¶2. (C) DCM and Poloff and a number of other diplomats (French Ambassador and DCM, British and Czech Charges, OSCE DCM, German First Secretary) waited outside the courtroom for proceedings to begin. However, after two hours, both defendants had not shown up and the judges did not know when they would receive the evidence and other case-related materials. Earlier at a March 21 press conference, Vyachorka told DCM that he planned to skip his court hearing in order to participate in the March 25 demonstration, claiming he would receive no more than a fine for his absence. Sivchik did show up, but 40 minutes late.

¶3. (C) Comment: We will see how authorities respond to Vyachorka and Sivchik on March 25; we expect both to be arrested on the square and sentenced to brief jail terms for organizing and participating in an "unsanctioned" demonstration.

Stewart